

**Be The Church – Reject Racism
Don Lincoln
1 John 3: 15-18**

When I was twelve, I lived in a suburb of Cincinnati, where the population was an even mix of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish families. It seemed to me we were all quite neighborly.

That is, until the White family moved in. That was their name. The Whites. The Whites happened to be black. Today we say African-American. When I was twelve, it was "black".

The Whites moved in around the corner; the first African-American family in our area. They already attended the same public schools as me and the kids on my street, but had moved from another part of the school district.

This was the late 1960's. If you were alive then, you remember racial tensions were high. Shortly after they moved in, someone burned a cross in the front yard of the White's home. I recall my parents discussing that with great sadness and dismay.

One day, after school, a group of us youngsters were playing in the neighborhood together. My house was on the end of a double cul-de-sac. Two circles – it was the best place to grow up. Five or six of us were riding our bikes around the circle, up the driveways, around the sidewalk, back into the street, and so on. Onto our street and into the neighborhood rode the two younger White (black) children. And without a moment's hesitation, we invited them to join us in our ride around the circle and in and out of the driveways in the neighborhood.

We were having a delightful time when, without warning, the neighbor across the street from my house stormed out his front door, screaming at his two children. "Ricky & Donna, get in this house right now!" None of us knew why, but it sounded like Ricky & Donna were in serious trouble. So we did what any kid that age would have done -- we stopped pedaling and straddled our bikes, watching to see what would happen to Ricky & Donna.

To our horror, the man turned to the two White children, and told them he didn't want his children playing with any "n*gg*rs", and they weren't welcome in his neighborhood. He cursed them out, threatened them, and told them to get the you-know-what out of there!

I can't imagine how terrified those two kids must have been. But they had obviously been well-schooled by their parents. They began to pedal away as quickly as their little legs would take them. Meanwhile, my father had been watching from our yard, where he was doing some trimming after getting home from work.

"STOP!" my father shouted to the two White children, as they sped toward the corner. The two youngsters obeyed, I'm sure hearts pounding, looked back toward my father wondering how bad the day was going to get.

My dad walked up to the two youngsters, and told them gently, "You can come into this neighborhood any time you want, and play in my yard with my kids. You will be safe there."

I was privileged to be raised by parents who taught me that neither the color of one's skin, nor the denomination of one's faith was just cause for determining one's worth. I was privileged, in those difficult days in our nation, to be raised in a home that did not join in any of the racism so prevalent at the time, privileged to be told that the "n-word" would never be heard crossing my lips unless I wanted to suffer severe punishment.

But, I need to say, even when I told that story in this pulpit 14 years ago, I don't think I had come close to comprehending how privileged I really was.

I was and am as privileged as you can get. White. Not just white – but Anglo-Saxon white – English, Scottish, Irish mostly. Male. Heterosexual male. Christian, and Protestant to boot. Solidly middle/upper-middle class. None of which I had anything to do with. An accident of birth. Privileges I neither earned or deserved. They were simply given to me. Sure – I had the choice of embracing Christianity, but I had nothing to do with being raised in a Christian home.

No one ever called me a derogatory name – and there were plenty back then. Nigger; Chink; Jap; Kike; Spic; Wop; Mick; Fag. My last name wasn't Kurzynski like a classmate's – it was LINCOLN. HOW GOOD DOES IT GET??!!! No one was ever surprised I was going to college. No one ever questioned my fitness for the ministry because of my gender, or quoted scripture at me when I asked to be ordained. No one ever spray painted nasty symbols on my house of worship.

Listen to verse 17: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?"

Did you know when the text says "the world's goods" it uses Greek words - **βιον του χοσμο (bion tou cosmo)** – "bion" from the root "bios" – from which we get biology. It's a primary word in the Greek meaning life – literally the state of one's existence. It's not goods like "material goods" of the world – it's more like all the goodies of the world – or more accurately, "the good life!" Listen to the text **NOW** if I use that kind of language: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the good life – the privileged life – and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?"

IF the race of life – at least in this country – were measured in one lap around a track, I started 10 yards from the finish line – not because of anything I've done, but because I'm a white man living in a white man's world. Privileged. So privileged my parents never had to have "the talk" with me.

Show Proctor and Gamble's video, "The Talk" – from the My Black is Beautiful campaign:

(50's mother to child while brushing her hair): *Who said that?*

(Daughter): The lady at the store.

(Mother): *That is not a compliment.*

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(60's mother): *Listen. That's an ugly, nasty word and you are going to hear it. Nothing I can do about that. But you are not going to let that word hurt you. Do you hear me?*

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(70's mother to young son in baseball uniform): There are some people who don't think you deserve the same privileges just because of what you look like. It's not fair; it's not.

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(80's mother to daughter getting ready to go to camp): Remember you can do anything they can. Difference is you gotta work twice as hard and be twice as smart.

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(90's mother to teenage son with drumsticks): *Come straight home after practice. You got your ID?*

(Son): Yeah.....

(Mother): *In case they stop you?*

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(2000's mom to daughter in car): *How's your rearview?*

(teenage daughter at wheel): We're good.

(mom): *Good? You can see? OK. Now, when you get pulled over.....*

(daughter): Mom, I'm a good driver. Don't worry.

(mom): *This is not about your getting a ticket. This is about your not coming home.*

(daughter): I'm going to be OK.....right?

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(70's mom): *It's not fair. But you keep showing up.*

(60's mom): *You are NOT pretty for a black girl. You are beautiful. PERIOD. OK? Don't ever forget that.*

Closing text on screen:

Let's all talk about "the talk." So we can end the need to have it.

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Now it's possible someone in here may have been offended by a portion of that video. Indeed, there were some folks upset when it first aired in August. We discussed as a staff whether to show it – was it going to be a little startling for some people? Would it imply some things you don't like. Not to mention, it was commissioned by that "progressive, left-wing radical" corporation known as Procter and Gamble!! ☺

Of course, the fact is, too often I, who had the privilege of the good life, get upset by how those who DIDN'T have it express their frustration or their anger – and make the issue all about me!

When colleagues around the country were considering posting "Black Lives Matter" banners in on their church property and encouraging colleagues like me to do so, I wanted to reply with **#All Lives Matter**. But I have asked myself, am I more offended by the way the black lives matter movement expresses concerns about white privilege – than I am offended by the realities of the white privilege itself that I enjoy?

I'm not one to do things considered unpatriotic. I not only stand when the national anthem is played at the ballgame, I actually sing it. But I have to ask myself, when it comes to Colin Kaepernick (*NFL player who has taken a knee during the National Anthem*) – am I more offended with the way he is expressing his dismay about racism in this nation, than I am offended by the existence of the racism itself?

The apostle Paul says, "In Christ there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female" – and that is true in Christ. But this nation is not yet color blind, not yet religion blind, not yet gender blind.

As important as it is, I don't think it's enough to just teach our children not to hate. Perhaps even the title of this sermon – reject racism – isn't sufficient. Perhaps "Dismantle Racism" would've been more fitting for this text from First John.

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the good life - the privileged life – and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?

What I am realizing for myself – in a new way and deeper way – is that rejecting racism is not just about me saying "That's not me; I don't use the N-word; I didn't teach my kids to be racist." This is about me – about me, a follower of Jesus – about me, a part of the church – continuing to work for a society that is more just – that pays attention to things like generational poverty; that seeks to address systemic racism wherever it exists. Yes, I care

about the prevalence for violence in neighborhoods – I care about the demise of the family in some cultures of our nation. But let me not go there first and forget about my privilege.

The text says love is known in action. Not by just speaking love. Not by just avoiding words of prejudice and hate. But by being known in action. No doubt the writer's demand for **embodied love** – incarnational love – results from his reading of his own community. It was a time of schism and dissent. The author knew what was most threatening to the Gospel was if Christians should continue pontificating about love while they turn hatefully from one another and ignore each other's needs.¹

I know this congregation gets it. When all those thousands of dollars came in for disaster assistance, not one of you wrote a note suggesting that your money only be used to assist "certain people."

Privilege means most of us in here owe a debt. You and I were born with privilege. We didn't ask for it. And we didn't pay for it either. No one is blaming you or me for having it. We are lovely, considerate, amazing, human beings – creations of God, convicted about God's love. But being a citizen of a society requires work from everyone within that society, to make that society work for everyone in it.

It is up to you and me whether we choose to acknowledge the work that is ours to do. It is up to us whether we choose to pay this debt and how we choose to do so. We have been blessed to be a blessing. I've been blessed way beyond anything I deserve...just by my birth. I'm to be a blessing.

Of course, you and I do have another advantage – the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Without the assurance of the Gospel, you and I – like so many others – would be trapped in hate and paralyzed by fear. And while we cannot possibly find within ourselves alone the power to give ourselves away for others, you and I belong to a God who has shown us what that looks like in Jesus Christ.²

God has made that kind of love visible, evident and real to and for us. "We know love by this," verse 16 says, "That He laid down His life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

The Cotton Patch Gospel translates it this way: "My little children. Let's not talk about love. Let's not sing about love. Let's put love into action and make it real."

May it be so.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Commentary on 1 John 3.
2. New Interpreters Bible, Commentary and Reflections on 1 John 3: 11-18.
3. Link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovY6yjTe1LE>